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## UA12/2/1 NCAA Extra - Going Dancing

WKU Student Affairs

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# GOING DANCING



Senior guard Kahlil McDonald celebrates with his teammates at the Sun Belt Conference Tournament in Summit Arena against the University of North Texas on March 6, in Hot Springs, Ark. McDonald scored 14 points to help WKU win 74-70 and advance to the NCAA for the 22nd time and first time since 2009.

## WKU's storybook season continues in 'Big Dance'

By COLE CLAYBOURN | [sports@wkuherald.com](mailto:sports@wkuherald.com)

### NCAA Tournament First Round

- No. 16 WKU vs. No. 16 Mississippi Valley State (21-12)
- TV: 5:30 p.m. CT, truTV (Jim Nantz, Clark Kellogg, Steve Kerr and Tracy Wolfson) or streaming at NCAA.com
- Radio: Hilltopper IMG Sports Network

What a ride it's been for 2011-2012 version of the Toppers. They started out 5-14, dealt with a mid-season coaching change and lost several players along the way due to injuries. Now they're headed to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2009. "A fiction writer couldn't have written a better script," WKU President Gary Ransdell said after the Toppers wrapped up an improbable

run to win the Sun Belt Conference Tournament championship last week in Hot Springs, Ark. Largely counted out by so many, including some fans, WKU — which entered the Sun Belt Tournament as the No. 7-seed with an 11-18 record — completed a storybook turnaround under new head coach Ray Harper.

SEE DANCING, NCAA EXTRA PAGE 2

“A fiction writer couldn't have written a better script.”

—GARY RANSELL  
WKU President

Dec. 10 2011	Dec. 17 2011	Dec. 23 2011	Jan. 5 2012	Jan. 6 2012	Jan. 7 2012	Feb. 19 2012	Feb. 25 2012	March 6 2012
WKU loses to IUPUI, 84-76	WKU loses at home to Furman, 76-63	WKU nearly upsets No. 4 Louisville, falls 70-60	WKU loses to Louisiana-Lafayette, 72-70 in OT. ULL wins with six men on the court, WKU has season-low attendance	Ken McDonald fired, Ray Harper named interim head coach	Ray Harper coaches first game, WKU has season-high attendance	Ray Harper named permanent head coach	WKU defeats rival MTSU at home, 73-67 in front of a sold-out Diddle Arena Crowd	WKU defeats North Texas — sixth win in a row — to win Sun Belt Tournament and earn NCAA Tournament berth

## WKU to face Miss. Valley St. in Dayton

By COLE CLAYBOURN | [sports@wkuherald.com](mailto:sports@wkuherald.com)

Head Coach Ray Harper had an idea where the Toppers might end up playing, but it became official when CBS announced the NCAA Tournament field on Sunday. WKU (15-18) earned a No. 16 seed and will play fellow No. 16 seed Mississippi Valley State — champions of the Southwestern Athletic Conference — at 5:30 p.m. CST on Tuesday in Dayton, Ohio as part of the “First Four.” “With a losing record, we thought we’d probably have a First Round game in Dayton,” Harper said. “We’re excited to still be playing basketball, and it should be a great game.” Tip-off is set for 5:30 p.m. CST but is subject to change. The game will be televised nationally on truTV, part of CBS’ affiliated network coverage for the NCAA Tournament.

When WKU’s name was called on Sunday, the cheering was not all for WKU’s first game, but rather the matchup that would occur if the Toppers win on Tuesday. The winner of Tuesday’s game gets a date with South Region and overall No. 1-seed Kentucky in Louisville on Thursday — a matchup some fans and players have wanted to see for years. Plenty of story lines would surface should that matchup happen. Freshman guard Derrick Gordon was a high school teammate of UK star Michael Kidd-Gilchrist. Freshman forward Vinny Zollo was once a UK commit under former coach Billy Gillispie but was passed over when current coach John Calipari was hired.

SEE DAYTON, NCAA EXTRA PAGE 2



WKU prepares before their game against North Texas in the Sun Belt Tournament in Hot Springs, Ark. WKU defeated the Mean Green 74-70 to win the Sun Belt Conference Tournament and earn an NCAA Tournament berth.



# DANCING

CONTINUED FROM NCAA EXTRA FRONT

The Toppers won their final six games of the season, including a 73-67 upset of league-leader Middle Tennessee State in front of a sold-out Diddle Arena crowd.

WKU went from playing in front just more than 2,000 fans in January to 7,326 in February.

The fans came in droves when the tides began to turn. The players credited their new coach, who brought a new style of play, a new mindset that focused on toughness and most importantly, a winning culture.

“Coach Harper’s a great man,” freshman George Fant said after WKU’s Sun Belt championship win. “He’s living out his dream right now. It’s unbelievable... He won a few championships, and he’s bringing that here to Western.

“There’s nothing you can do — you’ve just got to play for him. Whatever he tells you to do, you just go out there and do it. He’s a great man.”

As for Harper? He credited his players.

He praised their changed mindset, their renewed focus, their maturity as the season progressed and their intensity in practice.

He said leading up to the Sun Belt Tournament, his team was practicing so well it was “scary.”

Harper rarely had to raise his voice or tell his players to do something twice.

The result was a conference championship run where WKU won four games in four days, highlighted by two 13-point comebacks in the final eight minutes of both games.

“Give them credit — they bought in to what we were telling them,” Harper said. “I knew when we left Bowling Green, Kentucky, and I’ve said this to (the media) that have been there with me every day. I knew we had a chance, and in this

profession, this business, that’s all you ask. Give me an opportunity, and we’ll see what happens.”

Now the No. 16-seed Toppers sit as the lowest-rated team in the tournament and will have to play Mississippi Valley State on Tuesday night in Dayton, Ohio for the right to play No. 1-seed Kentucky on Thursday in Louisville.

But if you ask the players, they’ll tell you that they feel like a team that exudes confidence.

“Really, I don’t look at us — I was telling a lot of people asking us about seeding and everything like that, traditional 16 seeds — I don’t think we’re your traditional, standard 16 seed,” freshman forward Vinny Zollo said. “For us, six in row, conference championship, a lot of changes within the program, new coach, a whole new philosophy on the game and our hot streak and plus the fact we’re playing at home — we’ll have a great fan support I know in Dayton. We win there, and I know we’ll have an even better one in Louisville.

“...We feel right now we’re on fire, and whoever we’re going to play, we’re going to cause some serious trouble. For us, it’s just a huge amount of confidence riding right now.”

The fairytale run to a tournament berth brought tears to Ransdell’s eyes as he strolled around the confetti-filled Summit Arena court.

A controversial move to fire and hire a head coach mid-season had paid off. But more importantly for him, a storied program that had fallen so far in the past two years was finally back to relevance.

“This was our plan,” he said. “You don’t always know that a plan’s going to work out like you want it to, but this one has, and they’re not through yet. I do not discount what could be possible going forward next week with us. But more importantly than that, what lies ahead for the next few years is just really energizing.

“We’re back.”



MICHAEL RIVERA/HERALD  
Junior center Teeng Akol puts up a layup the Sun Belt Conference Tournament against Denver on Monday, March 5 in Hot Springs, Ark. WKU went on to win, 67-63.



MICHAEL RIVERA/HERALD  
LEFT: Freshman forward George Fant charges toward the basket at the Sun Belt Tournament. Fant scored 17 points, helping WKU win the Sun Belt Conference Tournament championship game 74-70 over North Texas. Fant was named the tournament’s Most Outstanding Player.

FAR LEFT: Freshman guard Derrick Gordon grabs a rebound during the Sun Belt Tournament final against North Texas on Tuesday.

## COLUMN

# This tournament’s for the 1,800

By BRAD STEPHENS | [sports@wkuherald.com](mailto:sports@wkuherald.com)

Look out for the bandwagon when you’re driving to Dayton on Tuesday.

Word has it it’s taking new passengers by the hour.

You’ll notice the bandwagon won’t have headlights. No, they’ll be switched out for glowing Harper Heads.

The people inside will be singing rounds of “99 red towels on the wall” and trying to confirm rumors that the Ohio River did indeed part on Sunday night when Harper’s team bus crossed the bridge into Cincinnati.

The Toppers are headed to the NCAA Tournament again, carrying a six-game win streak into a first round matchup with Mississippi Valley State at 5:30 p.m. CST on Tuesday.

It’s been a fun couple of weeks for a program that hasn’t had much fun the past few years.

But to really appreciate the ride, you have to be there

for the whole thing.

And that’s why the Toppers’ trip to the tourney should be dedicated not to the bandwagon, but to a group of 1,800 people.

These were the folks that were there when the lows hit their lowest on the Thursday night of Jan. 5.

Their numbers were originally thought to be 2,137, a figure which Athletics Director Ross Bjork confessed a day later to being “bumped up.”

He said it was more accurate that around 1,800 people were in Diddle Arena that night to see the now-infamous “six-man game,” in which Louisiana-Lafayette beat WKU 72-70, hitting a layup in the closing seconds with an undetected extra player on the floor.

Many of those 1,800 were probably the same people that were in Diddle on New Year’s

Eve when the Toppers were embarrassed by Florida International.

Many of those folks were probably there on Dec. 17 to see WKU lose to Southern Conference lightweight Furman.

These people had probably seen plenty of other disappointing Topper losses firsthand throughout the Ken McDonald Era.

Yet the fact that these 1,800 people were in Diddle Arena for the ULL game, watching a team whose play was nearly unwatchable at the time, shows the definition of a true fan.

One day later, of course, McDonald was fired and Ray Harper promoted.

Two months later, WKU was dogpiling at mid-court in Summit Arena celebrating a Sun Belt Championship and a trip to the NCAA Tournament.

The team was back, and so were a lot of fans that had once given up on the Toppers.



MICHAEL RIVERA/HERALD

WKU players hold up the Sun Belt Conference Tournament championship trophy. WKU beat North Texas 74-70 to win the Sun Belt’s automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. It will be WKU’s 22nd appearance in the NCAA Tournament and its first since 2009.

But there were 1,800 fans that never left.

They stuck with this WKU team when no one else did, and now get to celebrate its success with a little more perspective.

They saw firsthand the depths to which Topper basketball had fallen, and now they get to see the Toppers in the Big Dance.

For those supporters, this tournament is for you.

## DAYTON

CONTINUED FROM NCAA EXTRA FRONT

But Harper and his gang are trying not to look past MVSU, a team that comes in arguably as hot, if not hotter, than the Toppers.

The Delta Devils (21-12) started off the season 1-11 in a non-conference schedule that pitted them against teams such as Notre Dame, North Carolina, Florida and Wisconsin.

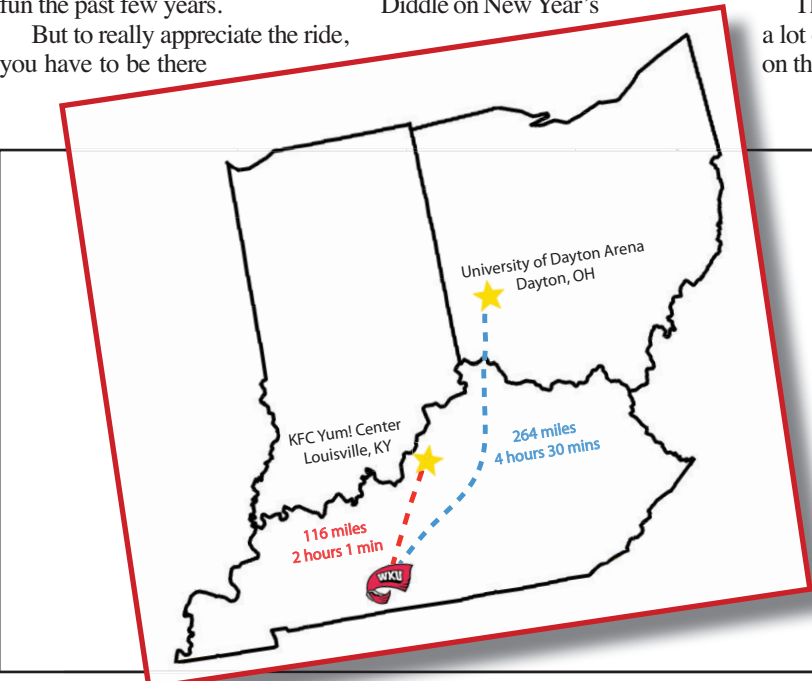
They went on to win 20 of their next 21 games in conference, losing just once to Arkansas-Pine Bluff, 78-

67, on March 1.

MVSU’s only non-conference win came on Nov. 25 — a 90-89 double overtime win over Tennessee State, a team WKU beat 52-49 on Nov. 14.

“Well we play Mississippi Valley State, that’s our first game,” Zollo said. “We’re going to prepare for them as much as we possibly can. I think we’ve done a good job of that throughout the whole tournament.”

“One game at a time,” that’s been the main preaching point from Coach Harper. “Take one game at a time. The most important game of our season is the next one.”



# Fans enjoy ‘family’ atmosphere for Selection Sunday

By JORDAN WELLS | [sports@wkuherald.com](mailto:sports@wkuherald.com)

An estimated 1,400 WKU fans showed up in Diddle Arena on Sunday to watch the Selection Show and see where the Toppers were headed in the upcoming NCAA tournament.

But according to Mt. Vernon freshman Sydney Arvin, for a few moments the crowd all came together as one big family.

“I feel like from the players, to the coaches, to the fans, we all united together when we saw WKU’s name flash on the screen,” she said. “It was a really cool experience.”

WKU’s name was one of first to pop up on the Diddle Arena screens showing CBS’ live broadcast of the Selection Show.

Fans cheered as it was announced the Toppers would play Mississippi Valley State on Tuesday in Dayton, Ohio — with overall No. 1-seed Kentucky waiting in the next round.

While Arvin said she’s looking forward to watching the Toppers first round matchup on TV, other fans have already made plans to make the drive to Dayton on Tuesday.

Longtime WKU fan David Carter said he’s already got tickets lined up for the Toppers’ Tuesday night game.

“The spirit is back here at WKU,” said Carter. “I believe this team believes they can

beat anybody, including Kentucky.”

However Carter said it was important the Toppers not overlook MVSU.

“They’re a senior loaded squad,” he said. “They played a ton of big road games this year out of conference, including at North Carolina. They aren’t going to be scared of us.”

Louisville junior Stephen Korfhage said he enjoyed the show WKU put on for Selection Sunday, which included performances from the pep band and cheerleaders and introductions of players and coaches.

He said he was confident about the Toppers advancing in the tournament.

“I can’t make it to Dayton, but I’m going to do my best to make it to Louisville when we advance,” he said.

Korfhage said he liked the Toppers’ chances in a potential second round matchup against Kentucky.

“I’ve seen them play a couple times this year,” he said of Kentucky. “The effort wasn’t always there.”

Elizabethtown senior Tyler Jury said he also thinks WKU is ready to “make some noise.”

“If we get past Mississippi Valley State, obviously UK is a really talented team,” he



JABIN E. BOTSFORD/HERALD

Sunbelt Tournament’s Most Outstanding Player George Fant hoists the Sunbelt Championship trophy over his head as the Hilltopper men’s basketball team was greeted by fans at South Campus following the team’s victory in the tournament

said. “But we’ve got some great talent too.”

Jury said he followed WKU’s road to the NCAA Tournament over spring break, one of several reasons he decided to join the team and other fans in Diddle for the

Selection Show.

“I watched every game over the break,” he said. “With how young they are, the potential for the team in the coming years is through the roof.”

# Harper adds another title to his legacy

By BRAD STEPHENS | [sports@wkuherald.com](mailto:sports@wkuherald.com)

Don’t blame George Fant for not knowing how many championships Ray Harper has won.

After all, WKU’s head coach has several titles to his name.

The freshman forward and his coach were taking questions from the media on March 6 after the Toppers won the Sun Belt Conference Tournament Championship and earned an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.

A reporter asked Fant about the impact Harper had made on the team since he was promoted to head coach on Jan. 6 when Ken McDonald was fired.

The Toppers, who were 5-11 on Jan. 6, have gone 10-7 under Harper.

“Coach Harper’s a great man,” Fant said. “He’s living out his dream right now. It’s unbelievable.”

Fant kept complimenting Harper then turned and asked him, “How many championships you win?”

Harper laughed and said, “A few.”

Fant turned back to the media with a grin and said, “He won a few championships, and he’s bringing that here to Western.”

Actually, Harper has four national

championships to his name in his 13 years as a collegiate head coach.

He won two Division II national titles and had four national runner-up finishes at Kentucky Wesleyan, then won two NAIA Division I championships and went to another title game at Oklahoma City University.

He didn’t win a national championship on March 6. But for a lot of WKU fans, it sure felt like one.

For the first time since 2009, the Toppers are going back to the NCAA Tournament.

Harper’s boss, Athletics Director Ross Bjork, said the newly hired head coach deserved as much praise as anyone for the team’s postseason run.

“What you look for is improvement each step of the way,” Bjork said. “... Coach went 10-7, won six games in a row, he’s undefeated as a permanent head coach.

“It’s a testament to Ray. The guy has a plan — he knows how to work with the kids, to inspire them. These guys had it in them — they just had to get the right person to get it out of them.”

Those results Harper got out of his

players started on the practice floor.

One of his first moves when he was promoted to interim head coach on Jan. 6 was to make practices faster and harder.

It took awhile for those results to pay off.

WKU started out 0-3 when Harper took over, as the team tried to get used to faster way of playing the game.

Players kept talking about how, even during weeks where they didn’t play a game, they were running more and working harder than they’d been all year.

The results of that work began to be seen in the last week of the regular season when the Toppers out-lasted Arkansas State and Middle Tennessee State for two big league wins.

Next up was the challenge of winning four games in four days at the Sun Belt Tournament.

But Harper said he didn’t see that kind of intense play focused over a short period of time as anything new for WKU.

“A lot of people talk about the four games in four days,” Harper said on Feb. 28. “But I said this before, if you ask our guys, they’d rather play four games in four days than have four of our tough

practices in four days.”

The Toppers proved their coach right by becoming the second team in Sun Belt history to win the title by winning four games in four days, not showing any ill effects of fatigue.

As the team celebrated last week, freshman guard Derrick Gordon called Harper’s up-tempo practices “the turning difference” in WKU’s season.

“Him pushing us so hard, making us win all these games, that’s what we need,” Gordon said. “Mac, he’s a good coach and all, but Harper really took it up a notch.”

Harper’s players have bought into his system, one that’s successes have been proven with national championships at other stops.

Harper can now add last week’s improbable conference title to his accomplishments.

“There were days when I told them, ‘I know you think I’m crazy because of how hard we’re working, but we’re preparing ourselves for an opportunity that’s going to present itself here in a couple of months,’” Harper said after the Sun Belt title game. “Give them credit — they bought into what we were telling them.”

# Critics quiet after Harper’s success

By COLE CLAYBOURN | [sports@wkuherald.com](mailto:sports@wkuherald.com)

When WKU made the decisions to fire Ken McDonald mid-season and then subsequently hire Ray Harper as the full-time coach, the moves were met with a fair bit of criticism from some national writers.

After Harper got off to a 4-7 start as interim head coach, some wondered why Athletics Director Ross Bjork and President Gary Ransdell named Harper permanent head coach on Feb. 19 instead of waiting until after the season to tab McDonald’s full-time replacement.

Those who followed the program closely understood the decision, and Bjork and Ransdell both said they conducted a national search and simply found Harper the best candidate.

But none of that matters now. Harper guided WKU to a 6-0 record after being named the permanent head coach, then led his team to its first NCAA Tournament berth since 2009 — an improbable run in and of itself.

Now many critics of WKU’s decision are biting their tongue.

“I don’t know how you can think anything but the fact that it turned out to be a great move, and I was wrong,” said Yahoo! Sports columnist Pat Forde, who was one of the more vocal

critics of the move.

After WKU won the Sun Belt Conference Tournament last Tuesday, Forde took to Twitter to relay the same message.

He told the Herald on Saturday that even after the fact, he’s still not a fan of mid-season firings and hirings, especially when the hire is made for a first-time Division I head coach with a losing record at the time.

But Forde said Bjork “knew who he was dealing with” when he made the decision to hire Harper full-time.

“Give credit to (Bjork) and the administration, but also give credit to the players for immediately buying in,” Forde said. “They rewarded the trust that the administration had in Ray Harper.”

Other writers, namely Jeff Goodman of CBSSports.com and Andy Katz of ESPN.com, were equally as critical. Goodman, who couldn’t be reached for comment for this story, wrote a blog post shortly after Harper was named head coach and called the move “surprising.”

He cited the same reasons that had Forde skeptical — a losing record, little experience and an apparent fast interview process by WKU.

Goodman hasn’t sent out

anything publicly rescinding his criticism, but columnist Eric Crawford of the Louisville Courier-Journal said anyone who criticized the move ought to rethink their stance.

“Well, I don’t think there’s much to say but that Harper is doing some things that resonate with these young players,” Crawford said. “If you were a critic of this move, I suspect you’ve moved away from that stance at this point.”

John Clay, a columnist for the Lexington Herald-Leader, said oftentimes people outside the program don’t always know what’s best for the players and the program.

Some thought WKU ought to give a look at names such as Florida assistant coach John Pelphrey, a former head coach at Arkansas and South Alabama, and Tim Fuller, an assistant coach at Missouri and popular assistant coach while at Louisville.

But under Harper, fan support skyrocketed, and attendance reached its highest levels of the season. Most fans seemed to be understanding of Harper’s 4-7 start due to the amount of young talent on the team.

Clay said WKU did well by realizing that and hinted



JABIN E. BOTSFORD/HERALD

Head Coach Ray Harper shouts instructions to the Toppers at the Sun Belt tournament against FIU on Saturday, March 3, in Hot Springs, Ark.

that the administration made the right move.

“Fans, and the media, fall prey to big names,” he said. “There are many coaches out there like a Ray Harper who never get their shot at this level because they don’t have the name recognition or background as other coaches. It’s great to see him taking advantage of that.”

Forde, Crawford and Clay all agreed that WKU’s turnaround this season was unlike any they’d seen in their years covering sports.

Each of them also said WKU has the potential to become a

dominant mid-major league team like Gonzaga, Xavier or Butler.

But Harper’s success was no surprise to Jim Pickens of the Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, who covered Harper during his entire nine-year tenure as head coach at Kentucky Wesleyan College.

Pickens would know as well as anyone the kind of coach Harper is. He said there’s no ceiling for Harper at WKU.

“He will expect and demand that this program go deep into the NCAA Tournament every year, beginning

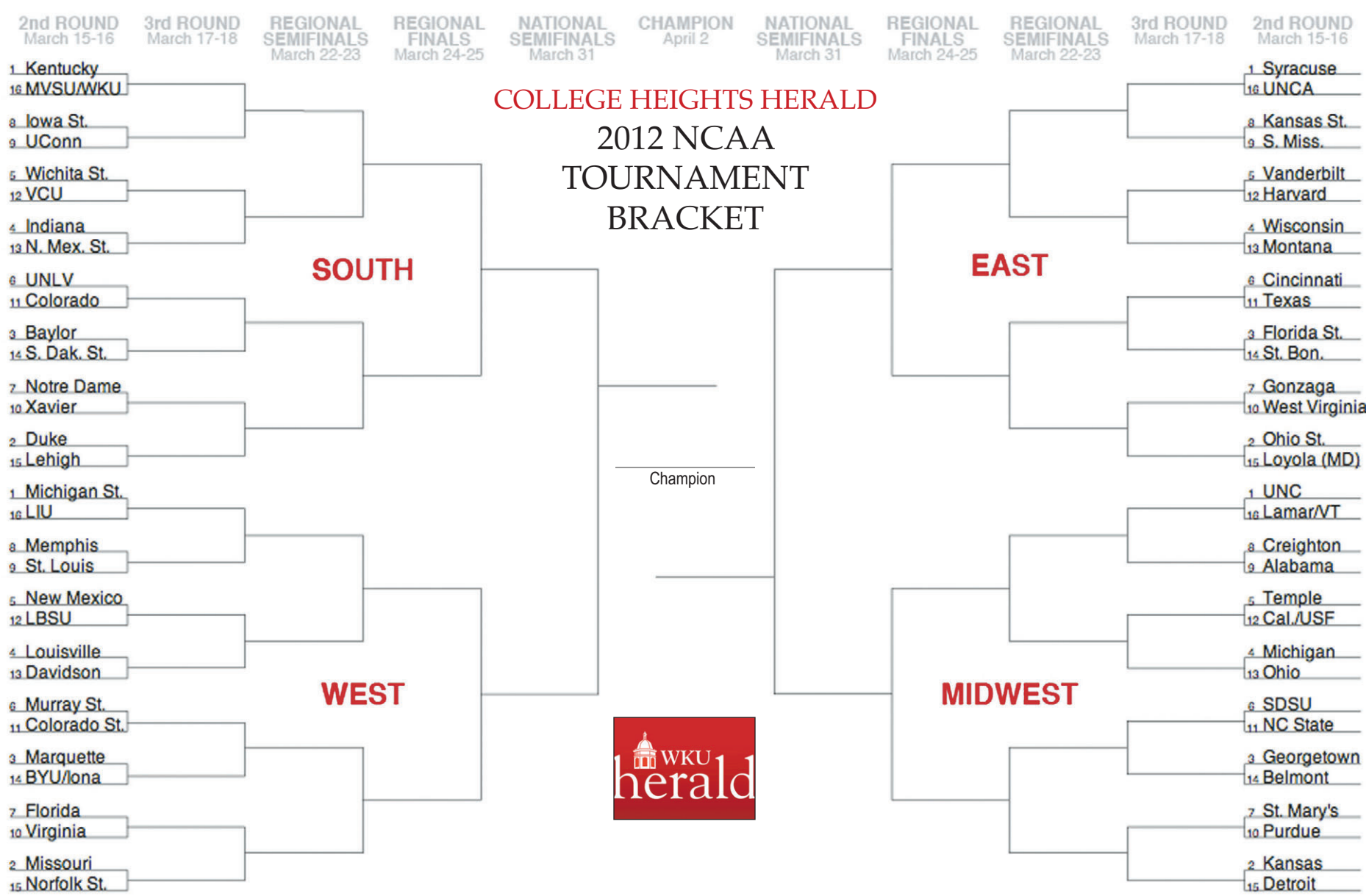
with his first full season at the helm in 2012-2013,” he said. “Realistic success? He’ll take the Hilltoppers to the Final Four before he’s done. The man has coached in nine national championships at the collegiate level. It’s in his DNA. It’s the only mode of operation he knows. Sounds incredible, right?”

“Well, just look at the last month of this season. Incredible and Ray Harper go hand-in-hand. Personally speaking, I believe Western Kentucky has the best college basketball coach in America.”



# NCAA EXTRA

March, 13 2012



## HERALD STAFF NCAA FINAL FOUR PICKS

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